# Ethnicity in the Tang Dynasty

Social scientist and historians have largely been involved in the study of ethnography and have helped in coining the definition of ethnicity as a form of the relationships between the political centre, minority groups, and majority groups in the context of the contemporary society and modern nation-state. This plays a fundamental role in presenting questions of democracy, racism, capitalism, imperialism, and modernity (Schafer, p. 407). On the other hand, ethnicity has been used largely by historians to understand premodern phenomena. Ethnicity, therefore, has been used as an analytical concept of interpreting various universal structures such as historical terms, homeland, community, and kinship. This paper will purposefully analyze to what extent it is useful to apply the concept of ethnicity to the Tang Dynasty.

Stereotypes are so common in society and reflect the insecurities and basic fault lines that the community harbors. In the Tang Dynasty, the official discourse and the prominence of stereotypes that are ethnically generated bespeak the ethnic boundaries that engender discomfort. It also shows how the Tang elites had been confronted with the profound need to understand and appreciate their own cultural, ethnic, and ambiguous identities (Abramson, p. 126). The ethnic stereotypes in Tang are rhetorically used extend in all periods and across all genres of the Tang Dynasty. As a result, this led to the conscious construction of non-Han to exemplify the outside, discursive category of people. This shows that the concept of ethnicity has been a characteristic of the Tang.

The ascribed ethnic content and ethnic difference were marked off using geographical boundaries and geographic features before Tang. This is mainly because the Chinese geographical discourse enhanced the establishment of ethnic boundaries as it incorporated ethnic content. As a result, this led to the origin of cultural and political boundaries that were oriented toward delimiting frontiers (Abramson, p. 128). This concept of using geographical boundaries played a significant role in structuring the Chinese cultural and ethnic division. Consequently, the Tang society was highly characterized by snobbery and class consciousness. This is strongly reflected in the aristocratic tradition of the dynasty. It can, therefore, be established that the Tang discourse was informed by a wide range of consciousness about ethnic differences and ethnicity.

The Han who considered themselves as the superior group came from the Central China. The Han used to refer themselves as the civilized while calling the non-Hans as barbaric based on their cultural differences. This was used to denote the externality, lack of civilization, and inferiority of the non-Hans as compared to the Hans (Schafer, p. 413). It is, in this regard, true to state that the Tang Dynasty has integrated the concept of ethnicity to distinguish those from the central China from those from the outside culture whom were mostly referred as others denoting the non-Hans. The connotation of the people in the Tang Dynasty in terms of their political and geographical considerations implied that groups and individuals whose designations were external to the Dynasty were eligible to be members and subjects of the Tang Empire.

Conclusively, it can be noted that in the Tang Dynasty words like *hu,* which denoted Central Asians, *di* denoting north*, rong* denoting west*, man* for south*,* and *yi* denoting east were commonly used to generically show that the identification and ethnicity was based on implicit geographical considerations (Schafer, p. 417). This showed that ethnicity was largely based on the connotation of the ethnic and cultural otherness. However, this did not exclude the non-Hans from membership in the Tang Dynasty.

## Works Cited

Abramson, Samuel, *Physiognomy and the Depiction of Barbarians in Tang China*, Deep Eyes and High Noses.1997.

Schafer, E, H, *Iranian Merchants in Tang Dynasty Tales*, University of California Publications in Semitic Philology. 1951.